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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to examine children's ability to deal with a particular form of figurative language, the simile, and the changes occurring in this ability as a result of regular, planned exposure to the form. Before and after an eight-week reading tutorial program, 17 children in the experimental group and 10 children in the control group completed a 60-item test of similes. During the tutorial period, the experimental group received practice in using similes. The items on the test were 20 multiple choice, 20 similes that the children had to judge as being "silly" or "not silly," and 20 similes that the children had to complete. Differences in pretest and posttest performance were analyzed separately for the three portions of the test. The analysis showed no significant differences for any of the subtests for the control group. In the experimental group, (1) the differences in pretest and posttest scores on the multiple choice portion were not significant but were in the expected direction; (2) significant differences appeared for decisions about "silly" and "not silly" similes; and (3) significant differences were found for the simile-completion task, the most demanding of the three tasks. (RL)

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Enhancing Children's Response to Figurative Language

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Authors of great stories for children will not be bound by the constraints of vocabulary control or literal-mindedness. They set, rather than follow, the rules. Their tales are told with verve and precision, their young readers assimilating what is meaningful to them. Witness Beatric Potter's descrption of the attempt of some sympathetic birds to comfort the entrapped Peter Rabbit: "A flock of friendly sparrows flew to him in great excitement and implored him to exert himself." Or this, from Rowen Bennett's "Motor Cars:" "They look like burnished beetles, black..." Indeed, this mind-stretching freedom from intellectual and linguistic fetters has often been advanced a reason for including the richly figurative materials of children's literature in the instructional programs of children. This paper describes the ability of elementary school children to deal with a particular form of figurative language, the simile, and with observed changes in this ability as a result of regular, planned exposure to the form.

Thirty children from four schools in a southern urban area, who had been referred by their teachers for tutoring in reading, served as subjects. Their grade placement ranged from kindergarten to fifth grade level. The majority of the students were referred for remedial work, but six were referred for purposes of enrichment. The tutoring was done by undergraduate students enrolled in a diagnostic reading course. Twenty children were originally placed in the experimental group, but because of transfers only seventeen students remained for the duration of the treatment. A control group of ten children received tutoring, but no structured exposure to similes during the treatment period.

At the outset of the eight-week tutorial and again at its conclusion, children in both the experimental and control groups were given a sixty-

item test of similes constructed by the writer. During the intervening period children in the experimental group were presented with specially constructed similes materials at two tutotial sessions per week. The practice sessions took no more than five minutes of the tutoring hour. For those children who were unable to read the test or the practice materials, the tutors read the items aloud and recorded the children's answers.

The similes test contained three types of items. The first portion of the test was composed of twenty multiple-choice items, in which the children were asked to choose the best completing term for the simile. An example follows:

The milk is as cold as

a. water

b. soup

c. cake

d. snow

The multiple-choice items had four alternatives arranged in random order: the correct choice, an attractive distractor, an irrelevant alternative, and an alternative opposite to the correct choice. Two judges independently categorized the multiple-choice alternatives into these classifications with 100% agreement.

The second portion of the test contained twenty similes which the students were to judge as being "silly" or "not silly," e.g. "The papers fell like snowflakes." The appropriateness or inappropriateness of the judgmental items also yielded 100% agreement between the raters.

The final twenty items required the children to supply the completing

terms of the similes; for example, "A kitten is like _____."

Half of the items in each of the three parts of the test followed the form "X is like Y," while the other half specified the manner in which the two things being compared were related, e.g. "X is as tall as Y." Care was taken not to include familiar similes, such as "fat as a pig," in order to avoid memory effects.

During the treatment period instruction paralleled the testing in that each day's practice materials contained one item reflecting each of the three portions of the test.

Differences in pre- and post-test performance were analyzed separately for the three portions of the test by one-tailed t-tests for directional hypotheses. In the control group there were no significant differences for any of the subtests. In the experimental group differences in pre- and post-test scores on the multiple-choice portion were not significant, although, as can be seen from Table 1, the differences were in the expected direction.

(Table 1 about here)

Examination of individual tests disclosed that a number of post-test answers were identical with pre-test choices, indicating that the children may have remembered their initial choices. Alternate forms for pre- and post-testing would be desirable in replicating this study.

The second subtest, in which the children were asked to decide whether twenty similes were "silly" or "not silly," showed a difference between experimental pre- and post-test means that was significant at the .05 level, as Table 2 discloses.

(Table 2 about here)

The experimental subjects apparently gained considerably in their ability to discriminate between appropriate and inappropriate comparisons and often volunteered the rationale for their decisions.

The third subtest, which required the children to complete the similes with suitable terms, would appear to be the most demanding of the three, and it yielded the most interesting results. Differences between experimental test means before and after treatment were significant at the .01 level, as Table 3 indicates.

(Table 3 about here)

In scoring the completion subtest, the children's answers were categorized as appropriate (2 points), marginal (1 point) or inappropriate (zero points) by two raters independently. Agreement was nearly 100% and, in the few instances in which judgments varied, discussion resolved the issue.

Discussion

The results of the study indicate that, if a desired goal of instruction is to heighten children's ability to discriminate between superior and inferior examples of the simile and to create acceptable examples themselves, exposing them in a sustained, regular fashion to materials containing these comparisons will substantially advance them toward that goal. However, several caveats may be in order here. In the experimental situation, the children's exposure to these materials was quite standardized and lacking in sponteneity. The practice materials were not related to the content of the remainder of the tutorial lesson, hence they lacked a meaningful context. While most of the children approached the similes sessions with evident gusto, a few of the older and more able children expressed the feeling toward the end of the experiment that the similes

exercises were becoming too much of a good thing. One notably creative fourth-grader commented, "Similes are like fleas!" -- thus proving her command of the form.

Perhaps a more natural plan would be to ensure that children, particularly the gifted, are surrounded by an environment rich in figurative language, but figurative language in its natural habitat -- children's literature, especially poetry. For those children whose language facility is more limited, periodic exposure to and discussion about this form of imagery appears useful.

Another result of the study which may be of concern should be noted. In the third portion of the test, in which the children supplied the completing term of the simile, responses on the post-test were more convergent than they had been on the pre-test. This was especially true of a kindergarten girl who was unusually proficient in her use of language. It would be important to avoid creating the impression that there was only one "best" response in what should be a heuristic, divergent intellectual activity.

The ability of these children, even at very young ages, to respond to and to create verbal images indicates that figurative language belongs in their reading materials. For these children the simile is an understandable, enjoyable and accessible form of imagery.

References

Bennett, R. "Motor Cars." In Huck, C. Children's Literature in the Elementary School, Third Edition, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976, p. 318.

Potter, B. The Tale of Peter Rabbit. London: Warne, 1902.

Table 1

Multiple Choice Test: Experimental Group
Means on Pre-Test and Post-Test

	Mean	s.d.
Pre-test	13.9	4.97
Post-test	14.5	4.07
Difference	.60	
SE_{diff}	.66	

$$t = \frac{.60}{.66} = .91 \quad \text{n.s.}$$

Table 2

Silliness Test: Experimental Group
Means on Pre-test and Post-test

	Mean	s.d.
Pre-test	15.4	2.95
Post-test	17.0	2.37
Difference	1.6	
SE_{diff}	.83	

$$t = \frac{1.6}{.83} = 1.93^{*}$$

*significant at .05 level

Table 3

Completion Test: Experimental Group
Means on Pre-test and Post-test

	Mean	s.d.
Pre-test	27.80	7.32
Post-test	31.13	5.71
Difference	3.33	
SE_{diff}	1.11	
t =	$\frac{3.33}{1.11}$ = 3.0*	

*significant at .01 level